

From Turf Wars, Doria Now Goes To Cities and Towns Ever the Survivor, He's To Join Corzine's Cabinet as Head of Community Affairs

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TRENTON -- Joe Doria may be the ultimate Statehouse survivor.

Over the past quarter-century, the burly Bayonne Democrat has weathered political wars in Trenton and on his home turf in Hudson County, where alliances can shift each day.

He lost the Assembly speaker post after voters revolted against tax increases he helped push. His hopes to get the job back a decade later were dashed when Gov.-elect James E. McGreevey engineered a political coup. And Hudson feuds this year finally ended his 26-career in the Legislature.

Each time the popular Doria gets hit, he finds a way to come back.

Tomorrow, he trades a state Senate seat and the Bayonne mayor's job for a spot in Gov. Jon Corzine's Cabinet as acting head of the Department of Community Affairs. He is expected to easily win Senate approval after Election Day.

Doria, 61, who will lead a high profile department that oversees cities and towns, is matter-of-fact about his staying power.

"I attribute that to the fact I've always tried to treat everybody fairly," he said. "I consider myself pretty even-tempered and I've been able to develop a positive relationship with both sides of the aisle."

John Wilson, president of the Independent College Fund of New Jersey who went to high school and college with Doria, said his ability to make friends with Republicans in a highly partisan era "is an important part of his success. He is one of the brightest people I know. He is a diplomat."

Former Assembly Speaker Chuck Haytaian (R-Warren) recalled that when Doria was speaker and he was minority leader, they would dine together.

"He said, 'Listen, I'm the speaker, you're the minority leader. What do you need? How can I help you out? How can you help me out?'" Haytaian said. "We broke bread and Joe kept his word."

The two maintained a working relationship when Republicans swept Democrats out of power and they traded roles.

"Joe Doria comes from Hudson County, where Republicans and others may think of politicians as people they may not want to associate with or trust as much," Haytaian said. "I never had that question with Joe Doria."

Former Assembly Speaker Jack Collins (R-Salem), who succeeded Haytaian, said he and Doria became such good friends that he named his 190-pound "large and friendly" English mastiff "Joe." In return, Doria named the family's Carin terrier "Jack."

A BAYONNE BOY

Doria grew up in Bayonne and lives with his wife and 8-year-old daughter in the same parish -- Our Lady of the Assumption -- he has called home all his life. When he was a youngster, his family had no car and he helped his mother carry groceries home from a market in the business district.

Doria, who spent nearly three decades as an educator and college administrator, says he always wanted to teach. His early passion for politics came from his father, Joseph Sr., a laborer.

"He was a World War I veteran who came from Italy when he was 20 years old," Doria said. "He made me very interested in government and politics. My father had a third- grade education, but he read a lot. He read the papers. He was very interested in current affairs and government."

Doria thought of joining the Jesuits, but the late Rev. Victor Yanitelli, a Jesuit and then president of St. Peter's College, urged him to stay involved in community affairs and politics. He was first elected to the Bayonne board of education, and an Assembly seat in Hudson County's 31st District came in 1979. A decade later, he was speaker.

But Doria, Gov. Jim Florio and every other Democrat became voter targets after they raised taxes \$2.8 billion. Doria, who twisted arms to get the tax hikes passed, soon found himself leading a tiny Democratic Assembly minority.

A decade out of power took a toll on Doria's reputation as a diplomat. Assemblyman Joseph Roberts (D-Camden), now the speaker, twice tried to get his job as minority leader, saying he was "frustrated with Doria's leader ship." The efforts fell short, but opened a schism between north and south Jersey Democrats.

When Democrats finally re gained the majority in the Assembly four years later, McGreevey chose little-known Albio Sires, not Doria, for Assembly speaker.

In 2005, Gov. Richard Codey's push to name Doria president of Ramapo College was thwarted when opponents said it was a political move.

"I think it was unfortunate," said Codey (D-Essex), the Senate president. "It was because he was a state senator. He was clearly qualified."

ANOTHER CHALLENGE

Doria says he doesn't dwell on his disappointments.

"I learned a long time ago that you can't please everybody," he said. "But that is in the past."

While known as a collegial lawmaker -- he speaks fluent French and holds a doctorate from Columbia University Teacher's College -- Doria could mix it up in rough-and- tumble Hudson County.

He became Bayonne mayor in 1998, joining a wave of dual office-holding that will soon be banned in the Legislature. He faced off against factions led by the late Jersey City Mayor Glenn Cunningham, and later, his wife, Sandra Bolden Cunningham.

Doria's stewardship as mayor came under fire from some council members. In July, Bayonne ended the fiscal year with a \$23 million deficit -- something frowned upon by his new state department.

At the time, Councilman Anthony Chiappone, a political foe, said Doria "lied to the public by assuring them that the money would come in." Doria says it will be recouped by a \$23 million land sale at the Military Ocean Terminal.

Chiappone said he believes Doria is better-suited to serve in a "big picture" role as a commissioner dealing with statewide issues, where he doesn't have to worry about nitty-gritty details of running a major city. "He's better big-scale than small-scale," he said. In Trenton, where he is known for legislation on education and health care reform, Doria remained well-liked by his colleagues. He will lead a department that doles out more than \$1 billion in aid to towns and is in charge of everything from affordable housing to amusement park safety.

"Obviously, it is a challenge," Doria. "But my time in government, in the Legislature and as mayor, has given me the opportunity to understand what is needed to get the job done effectively."

Doria said moving on Corzine's pledge to provide 100,000 affordable and "work-force" houses and apartments over 10 years is his biggest issue. "We need homes for workers, otherwise the economy does not progress," he said.

Hours before Corzine announced his nomination; Doria met with advocates on housing, planning, building and the environment and said he would listen "to all points of view." Always strident and rarely happy, the advocates left professing optimism -- for now.

Codey, for one, believes Doria can keep all factions talking.

"To survive in Hudson County for so long," he said, "that in itself is a testament to his ability to work with people."